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William L. Roper, MD  
Interim President  
University of North Carolina System  
[roper@northcarolina.edu](mailto:roper@northcarolina.edu)

Robert Blouin, PharmD  
Executive Vice Chancellor & Provost  
UNC-Chapel Hill  
[Bob\\_Blouin@unc.edu](mailto:Bob_Blouin@unc.edu)

Richard Y. Stevens  
Chair, Board of Trustees  
UNC-Chapel Hill  
[richardstevens@unc.edu](mailto:richardstevens@unc.edu)

Terry Magnuson, PhD  
Vice Chancellor for Research  
UNC-Chapel Hill  
[tmagnuson@unc.edu](mailto:tmagnuson@unc.edu)

Re: *UNC Concussion Research Program*

Dear UNC Executive Leaders,

As national and international leaders in the concussion research community, we are writing to you in response to an article that appeared in The Athletic on October 8, 2019. It is our unified position that this article made numerous baseless and unfounded criticisms against UNC faculty member Dr. Kevin Guskiewicz, the UNC Matthew Gfeller Sport-Related TBI Research Center, and the larger concussion research community that we represent. Our aim in this unsolicited communication is to provide you with a factual account that refutes claims made by The Athletic.

As you are aware, the piece in The Athletic stems from a prior publication in June 2019 entitled "*Cognitive Deficits and LD/ADHD Among Incoming College Football Athletes: Legal and Medical Implications of Undisclosed Inclusion in Concussion Research.*" Of note, this article was published in volume 1, issue 1 of the Journal of Scientific Practice and Integrity (JoSPI), which to date remains the only published issue of this journal. To our knowledge, neither of the authors are recognized experts in our field, and we seriously question whether they have the subject matter expertise in either concussion or LD/ADHD that would qualify them to author a paper on this complex topic. Therefore, we consider the original source of The Athletic article to be highly questionable, at best. It definitely should not be considered of the same caliber as the high-quality work that UNC faculty have become known for in concussion research over the past 25 years.

Most importantly, we consider the allegations of "scientific misconduct" made by the authors of these articles to be preposterous, patently false, and potentially actionable. The claims made by these unqualified authors about LD/ADHD are not substantiated by evidence and are not widely accepted in our community. To clarify, it has not been and is not currently common practice to exclude athletes with ADHD/LD from concussion research studies. In fact, a large-scale systematic review on predictors of recovery from concussion published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine determined that "*those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or learning disabilities do not appear to be at substantially greater risk*" of longer recovery.<sup>1</sup> As evidence of their lack of subject matter

expertise, the authors of the JoSPI paper relied on research from 20 years ago that initially raised issues around ADHD/LD and concussion, but which the predominance of data reported in the BJSM paper has since refuted.

The allegations in the recent media piece in no way render prior work by UNC faculty or the larger concussion research community “invalid”, as suggested by The Athletic. The published studies by UNC faculty, and our larger research community, have followed accepted standards in the field and were conducted with the highest rigor and integrity. Further, the original research papers by UNC faculty cited by The Athletic all underwent rigorous peer review before publication in reputable, high impact scientific journals.

Notably, Dr. Walter Koroshetz, Director of the National Institute of Health (NIH) National Institute of Neurologic Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) responded to the latest media piece by stating that Dr. Guskiewicz and UNC faculty *“have the highest integrity in terms of the science that they do.”* This is an incredibly powerful statement from NIH leadership who is charged with critically evaluating the quality of neurologic research on a daily basis and who sets the national agenda for neurologic research. It also casts major doubt on the credibility of the articles in JoSPI and The Athletic.

The Athletic did, however, manage to get a few things right. First, Dr. Guskiewicz is a universally respected and beloved member of our community. Second, the Matthew Gfeller Sport-Related TBI Research Center is recognized world-wide as a leading center of excellence in concussion research. Third, work by Dr. Guskiewicz and UNC faculty has directly informed international consensus guidelines that improved health and safety for athletes at all competitive levels around the world. Finally, Dr. Guskiewicz and UNC faculty are universally respected for the quality, rigor, and integrity of their work.

In closing, we know Dr. Guskiewicz and all UNC faculty involved in concussion research to be of the highest ethics, integrity and honor. Dr. Guskiewicz’s dedicated leadership at your institution, his impact on academic medicine over the past 25 years, and his record of service to our international community are direct testaments of his character. We have every confidence that, under Dr. Guskiewicz’s leadership, UNC will continue to do groundbreaking research that has a major positive impact on science, medicine and public health around the globe for years to come.

Please feel free to contact Dr. Michael McCrea ([mmccrea@mcw.edu](mailto:mmccrea@mcw.edu)) as a point of contact for our group if you would like to discuss further.

Sincerely,

Michael McCrea, PhD  
Medical College of Wisconsin

William Barr, PhD  
NYU School of Medicine

Gerald A. Gioia, PhD  
Children’s National Health System  
George Washington Univ. School of  
Medicine

Kristy B. Arbogast, PhD  
University of Pennsylvania

Breton M. Asken, PhD  
University of California, San Francisco

Talin Babikian, PhD  
University of California, Los Angeles

Julian E. Bailes, M.D.  
NorthShore University HealthSystem

Christopher Bailey, PhD  
Case Western Reserve Univ. School of Medicine

Mark T. Barisa, PhD  
Performance Neuropsychology

Jeffrey T. Barth, PhD  
University of Virginia School of Medicine

Adam Bartsch PhD PE  
Prevent Biometrics

Russell M. Bauer, PhD  
University of Florida

Jeff Bazarian, MD, MPH  
Univ. of Rochester School of Medicine

Ralph H B Benedict, PhD  
University at Buffalo

Robert Bornstein, PhD  
Ohio State University Medical Center

Benjamin Brett, PhD  
Medical College of Wisconsin

Steven P. Broglio, PhD  
University of Michigan

Alison Brooks, MD  
University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health

Jill Brooks, PhD  
Head to Head Consultants

Donna K. Broshek, PhD  
University of Virginia School of Medicine

Samuel R. Browd, M.D., Ph.D.  
University of Washington

Jared Bruce, PhD  
University of Missouri-Kansas City

Thomas A. Buckley, PhD  
University of Delaware

Scott Burkhart, PhD  
Children's Health Andrews Institute

Richard Campbell, PhD  
Univ. of New Mexico School of Medicine

Robert Cantu, MD  
Boston University School of Medicine

Douglas J. Casa, PhD, ATC  
University of Connecticut

Cindy Chang, MD  
University of California, San Francisco

James C. Chesnutt MD  
Oregon Health Sciences University

Meeryo Choe, MD  
University of California, Los Angeles

Sara PD Chrisman, MD, MPH  
University of Washington

Jay Clugston, MD  
University of Florida

Paul E. Cohen, PsyD  
Clinical Neuropsychologist

Paul Comper, PhD, C.Psych  
University of Toronto

Alanna A. Conder, PsyD  
Carolina Neuropsychological Service

Robert L. Conder, Jr, PsyD  
Carolina Neuropsychological Service

David B. Coppel, PhD  
University of Washington

Ron Courson, ATC  
University of Georgia

Munro Cullum, PhD  
Univ. of Texas Southwestern Medical Center

Steven T. DeKosky, MD  
University of Florida

LTC Stephen M. Delellis  
Defense Medical Strategies

John DeLuca, PhD  
Kessler Foundation

Nyaz Didehbani, PhD  
University of Texas Southwestern

Peter Duquette, PhD  
UNC School of Medicine

Ruben Echemendia, PhD  
UOC Concussion Care

Richard Ellenbogen, MD  
Univ. of Washington School of Medicine

Carolyn Emery, PhD  
University of Calgary

Philip S. Fastenau, PhD  
Case Western Reserve Univ. School of Medicine

Eric J. Freitag, PsyD  
UCSF-Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland

Jonathan French, PsyD  
University of Pittsburgh

Don Gerber, PsyD  
Consultant, Major League Rugby Ad Hoc Concussion Committee

Christopher Giza, MD  
University of California, Los Angeles

Ann Glang, PhD  
University of Oregon

Leslie Guidotti-Breting, PhD  
Northshore University Health System

Lisa and Robert Gfeller  
Parents of Matthew Gfeller

Brian Hainline, MD  
National College Athletic Association

Paule Hardy, PhD  
CogniSports, Inc.

Kimberly Harmon, MD  
Univ. of Washington School of Medicine

Mark Herceg, PhD  
Phelps Hospital Northwell Health

Stanley A. Herring, MD  
University of Washington

David Hovda, PhD  
University of California, Los Angeles

Michael S. Jaffee, MD  
University of Florida

Thomas W. Kaminski, PhD, ATC  
University of Delaware

- Michael W. Kirkwood, PhD  
University of Colorado School of Medicine
- David M. Lechuga, PhD, ABPP  
University of California, Los Angeles
- John Leddy, MD  
University of Buffalo
- Robert C. Lynall, PhD, ATC  
University of Georgia
- A.C. Maerlender, PhD, ABPP-CN  
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
- Joseph Maldjian, MD  
Univ. of Texas Southwestern Medical Center
- Geoffrey T. Manley, MD, PhD  
University of California, San Francisco
- Christina L. Master, MD  
University of Pennsylvania
- Catherine McGill, PsyD  
McGill Neuropsychology
- Timothy A. McGuine, PhD, ATC  
University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health
- Tamara McLeod, PhD  
A.T. Still University
- William Meehan, MD  
Harvard Medical School
- Martin Mrazik, PhD  
University of Alberta
- Aaron Nelson PhD  
Brigham and Women's Hospital
- Marc Norman, PhD  
University of California, San Diego
- William Perry, PhD  
University of California, San Diego Health Systems
- Elizabeth M. Pieroth, PsyD  
NorthShore University HealthSystem
- Kenneth Podell, PhD  
Houston Methodist
- Pauline Prince, PhD  
Mississippi State University
- Margot Putukian, MD  
Princeton University
- Christopher Randolph, PhD  
Loyola University Medical Center
- Danielle Ransom, PsyD  
Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital
- Nicole Reams, MD  
Northshore University HealthSystem
- Frederick P. Rivara, MD, MPH  
University of Washington
- Maegan Sady, PhD  
Children's National Hospital
- Scott Sautter, PhD  
Hampton Roads Neuropsychology
- Tad Seifert, MD  
Norton Healthcare
- Marla Shapiro, PhD  
UnityPoint Sports Medicine
- Kathryn Schneider, PhD  
University of Calgary
- Gary Solomon, PhD  
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine

Joel Stitzel, PhD  
Wake Forest University

Rodney A. Swenson, PhD  
University of North Dakota School of  
Medicine and Health Sciences

Mark E Todd, Ph.D.  
Cleveland Clinic Florida

Robert J. Tomaszewski, PhD  
University of California, Los Angeles

Chris Vaughan, PsyD  
Children's National Hospital

Erin B. Wasserman, PhD

Christopher T. Whitlow, MD, PhD, MHA  
Wake Forest University School of  
Medicine

Alissa Wicklund, PhD, ABPP  
Colorado State University

Vernon Williams, MD  
Cedars-Sinai, Kerlan-Jobe Institute

David Wright, MD  
Emory University School of Medicine

Keith Owen Yeates, PhD  
University of Calgary

Ross Zafonte, DO  
Harvard Medical School

Maya Zayat, PsyD  
Nemours/A.I. duPont Hospital for  
Children

Scott L. Zuckerman, MD, MPH  
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine

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Cc: Kevin Guskiewicz, PhD, Jason Mihalik, PhD, Co-Directors, UNC Matthew Gfeller Sport-Related TBI Research Center